

Timbuktu and Walata: lineages and higher education

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On 25 November 1961, Kwame Nkrumah inaugurated the University of Ghana with a speech that drew upon the history of education in Africa and specifically cited the West African centres of Islamic scholarship, Timbuktu and Walata. Nkrumah praised Walata and Timbuktu for their contribution to medieval African education and singled out what he called the 'University of Sankore' in Timbuktu. He argued that 'if the University of Sankore had not been destroyed, if the University of Sankore as it was in 1591 had survived the ravages of foreign invasions, the academic and cultural history of Africa might have been different from what it is today'¹. Nkrumah's statement referred to the scholars associated with the Sankore Mosque, and the plight of those scholars under the Maghribi (Moroccan) occupation of Timbuktu that began with the invasion of the Songhay Kingdom in 1591. In this speech Nkrumah seems to have used the word 'African' to mean sub-Saharan, as he did not refer to the al-Azhar school, founded in Cairo in the tenth century, as part of the history of African education, and he referred to the Moroccan expeditionary force as 'foreign invaders' even though they were also African, at least in the continental sense of the word. A few years later the Nigerian scholar JF Ade Ajayi contradicted Nkrumah in his introduction to a short biography of Samuel Ajayi Crowther (the first black Anglican bishop), writing that in 1827 Crowther was the 'first student to register at Fourah Bay College in Freetown, now the oldest institution of higher learning in West Africa'².

In this chapter I will argue that Ajayi was not quite correct, but neither was Nkrumah. Fourah Bay College was not the oldest institution of higher learning in West Africa. However, Nkrumah was also not quite right in suggesting that the Sankore Mosque and similar institutions in towns such as Timbuktu and Walata were African while al-Azhar was not. Nor do these West African institutions resemble the original meaning of the Latin word *universitas*, which means 'corporation'. The scholars of Timbuktu, like those in many other West African towns, did achieve a high level of Islamic scholarship by the sixteenth century, the point at which they began to produce their own scholarly

Opposite: Sankore Mosque, centre of higher learning in Timbuktu from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

The scholars of Timbuktu, like those in many other West African towns, did achieve a high level of Islamic scholarship by the sixteenth century, the point at which they began to produce their own scholarly literature. But these scholars did not acquire their skills in universities, according to the modern or the medieval European model. Instead, they acquired their knowledge through informal institutions that may have been in many ways distinctively West African, and were also clearly multi-ethnic and multiracial.

literature. But these scholars did not acquire their skills in universities, not according to the modern model, nor to the medieval European model. Instead, they acquired their knowledge through informal institutions that may have been in many ways distinctively West African, but were also clearly multi-ethnic and multiracial. It is not unreasonable that many people, from Nkrumah to Henry Louis Gates, have expressed their admiration for this scholarship by attributing it to a 'university' in Timbuktu. After all, Nkrumah was trying to inform a European or European-influenced audience, and attract international students to Ghana's new, modern university. And besides, there was no convenient English word or phrase to describe the informal institutions of West African Muslim scholarship. The problem with the term 'university' is that while it conveys status and achievement, it also obscures much that was distinctive and admirable about Muslim scholarship in towns like Timbuktu.

Now that nearly 40 years have passed since Nkrumah's speech, and institutions like the University of Ghana have uncovered so much more of the African past and rendered colonial versions of African history obsolete – now it is time to replace the flattering but misleading caricature of Muslim education in late medieval and early modern West Africa.

Many of the medieval European universities were similar to the earlier monastic schools, as they were created and controlled by the Catholic Church, and are sometimes called 'cathedral schools'. The University of Bologna, founded in 1088, was an exception as it was primarily secular. But even the curricula of the cathedral schools were generally secular, specialising in law and medicine. These early European 'universities' were called *universitas* because they started as small corporations of students or teachers. When the Church and the various states recognised these corporations, they regulated them and granted them privileges. The Church granted the privilege of teaching, which had previously been reserved, and the states granted the teachers and students exemptions from financial and military services.³ By contrast, higher education in medieval and early modern West Africa was always explicitly religious, though religious scholars and teachers had never been subject to higher Islamic authority. There was never an Islamic counterpart of the Catholic Church. Nor did students and teachers in towns such as Timbuktu and Walata form corporations in the European sense. The state of Songhay, in the person of the ruler (*askiya*) and his governors, did confer gifts and privileges on important scholars in Timbuktu and elsewhere in the kingdom, but these were directed to individuals or families, not a corporation of teachers or students. And many towns, such as Walata, stood outside the borders of states for most of their history, and guarded their autonomy jealously.

I argue that although higher education in late medieval West Africa did not take place in corporations as such, there was a corporate aspect to production and reproduction of scholarship in the region. I will also argue that one should resist the temptation to describe the scholarly institutions in Timbuktu and Walata as 'black', as they clearly were multi-ethnic and multiracial, though they derived a substantial portion of their

vitality from scholars of southern origin. The institutions of West African higher education were not mosques, but rather extended families or lineages. Elias Saad, in his excellent book *A Social History of Timbuktu*, described how these families maintained reputations for scholarship over centuries, and referred to them as patrician families. Saad was right to marvel at the long-term persistence of these families or coalitions of families, but in many respects they were highly dynamic despite their great longevity and continuity. Two of the most prominent families in the history of Timbuktu apparently had their origins in Walata, the Aqit family and the family known as the Banu al-Qadi al-Hajj. Elements of these families emigrated back and forth between Walata and Timbuktu several times over a period of about 300 years. In the 1700s those that had moved back to Walata seem to have disappeared. But I argue that their disappearance is explained by the formation of a political coalition that included these families and various Walati families, the most prominent of which were the families of Baba Masir Biru and 'Ali Sila – two families who bore apparently Soninké or Mande names. These and other families coalesced into a group that became known as the Lemhajib, and after a few generations of intermarriage within the group they effectively became a great extended family.

Walata and Timbuktu

The towns of Timbuktu and Walata almost certainly began as small black settlements, Songhay or Sorko in the case of Timbuktu and Mande in the case of Walata. However, by the thirteenth or fourteenth century AD both towns were multi-ethnic, multiracial centres of commerce and Islamic scholarship.

Many of the early scholars of both towns were of sub-Saharan origin, although the evidence for this is much stronger for Timbuktu than it is for Walata. That is because although Timbuktu is not nearly as old as Walata, it developed a lively literary production before Walata. However, as time passed, fewer and fewer scholarly families in both towns claimed a West African ethnic identity, and some that did nevertheless also claimed to be patrilineally Arab and therefore Bidan (white). By 1800 there were no scholarly families left in Walata that claimed anything other than an Arab identity, and the only people who considered themselves to be Sudan (black) were marginalised people whom the elite 'Arabs' defined as slaves or people of slave origin. In Timbuktu the situation was similar but not nearly so stark.

Over the course of the last millennium Walata has been dominated by three successive cultural groups. Accordingly, it has been known by three different names: Biru, Iwalatan, and Walata, each name marking a period of a particular cultural dominance in the town. In its earliest period the town was known by the Mande name 'Biru' and was located on the periphery of the Ghana Empire. Later it was drawn into the Mali and then the Songhay Empires, and began also to be known by the Berber name 'Iwalatan'. By the end of the Songhay period in the late sixteenth century, the town

began to be referred to as 'Walata', the Arabised form of 'Iwalatan'. 'Biru' is the plural form of the Mande word *bire* meaning 'a roof made of straw supported by wooden sticks', which suggests a market.⁴ Similarly, the Malinke word *wala* means 'shady spot'. The name 'Iwalatan' is the Berber form of this word, and 'Walata' is the Arabised version.⁵ This and other evidence suggest that the original inhabitants of the town that later became known as Walata were Mande agriculturists.⁶

Walata was built on a slope descending from an escarpment varying in height from about 60 to 80 feet above the valley. The oldest sections are the highest on the escarpment's slope, quite near the edge. As the town grew, it expanded down the slope.⁷ New houses and groups of houses were grafted onto the town so as to preserve its enclosed outer wall, for defensive purposes. Today the general division of the town into upper (*vogani*) and lower (*tahtani*) sections is a part of everyday life. For example, a woman from the upper part of town might refer to a friend from the lower part as her *tahtaniyya* friend.⁸ The upper and lower sections of town also reflect the town's cultural history in their place names. Upper sections of the town still bear place names from a non-Arabic language that my informants described as 'Azayr', such as Gidinu, Karavolé, Kamrankani, Gumbusinya and Dnayda. Lower sections of town tend to bear Arabic place names, such as Rahba Lahbib, Luqmayd, Rahba Il-bir Buya, Rahba Libel and Rahba Lemlid.⁹ Walata is a labyrinth of narrow streets and small, closed-in spaces, and in this respect it is a highly urban environment (similar to Timbuktu).

Timbuktu grew rapidly in the thirteenth or fourteenth century and eventually replaced Walata as the premier trading town in the southern Sahara, drawing away many of its traders and scholars.¹⁰ Despite this shift in trade, Walata survived and even served as a haven for scholarly families of Timbuktu that opposed the expansion of the Songhay Empire in 1465 and the invasion of a Maghribi expeditionary force in 1591. While most of the families fleeing Timbuktu bore Berber or Mande names, some may have been Songhay, or at least culturally Songhay. Leo Africanus, writing from the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century, asserted that Songhay was spoken at Walata.¹¹ Both floods of refugees temporarily revitalised Walata, and the refugees of 1591 probably helped Walata to start its own literary production. Azayr, a mixture of Mande and Berber, was an important language in Walata at the end of the sixteenth century, despite emigration from Timbuktu and the growing presence of Arabic speakers in the southern desert. But the emigration of nomadic Arabs and later sedentarised Arabs from northern Saharan oases began to transform Walata's Mande/Berber culture.¹² By the early seventeenth century individuals and families from the locally dominant Hassani groups began to sedentarise in Walata and by the mid-seventeenth century Timbuktu historians began to refer to the town as Walata, the Arabised form of Iwalatan. Yet, of the three names, Biru was still the most widely used.¹³

Walata's relative importance as a centre of trade within Takrur was apparently eclipsed by the growth of Timbuktu in the fourteenth or fifteenth century. Al-Sa'di, writing

from Timbuktu in 1655, provided information about Walata in the context of Songhay history. He described the decline of Biru and the rise of Timbuktu and made strong statements about the cultural heritage of both. He asserted that Timbuktu and Biru drew their culture almost exclusively from north-west Africa. This assessment closely resembles al-Bakri's description of Awdaghust. Al-Sa'di wrote:

The commercial center [of the region] used to be Biru. There flowed caravans from every land, and great scholars, and pious persons. Wealthy people from every race and every country settled there, including people from Egypt; Aujela Fezzan; Ghadanies; Tuwat; Dra'; Tafilalt; Fez; the Sus; Bitu; and others. All of that was transferred to Timbuktu little by little until they were concentrated at Timbuktu. Additionally, all the tribes of the Sanbaja rejoined their elements [which had moved to Timbuktu]. The prosperity of Timbuktu was the ruin of Biru. Its [Timbuktu's] civilization came to it exclusively from the Maghrib, in matters of religion as well as trade. In the beginning, homes of the [indigenous] residents consisted of enclosures of sticks and straw, then they were replaced by small houses of clay.¹⁴

Although al-Sa'di asserted that the most prominent citizens of Biru/Walata were originally from North Africa, and that Timbuktu derived its civilisation from the Maghrib, other sources, and even al-Sa'di's own work, suggest that this was an exaggeration.¹⁵ Among the origins of Biru's immigrants, al-Sa'di mentioned only one place south of the Sahara, Bitu.¹⁶ Nor did he mention in this passage the local and sub-Saharan scholars of Biru. But this characterisation of Biru and Timbuktu is contradicted by al-Sa'di's own detailed account of Songhay history. It is true that Islam spread from North Africa to Biru and Timbuktu, and most of the early development of Maliki law, the dominant school of Islamic law in West Africa, took place in north-west Africa. But al-Sa'di and other West African scholars recorded the development of West African scholarship, which included many important sub-Saharan scholars. One of the earliest scholars in Timbuktu was Muhammad al-Kabari, who came from a town in the Niger flood plain near Dia. Additionally, the regional trade towns supported several large families that enjoyed a scholarly reputation, among them the Gidadu, Gurdu and Baghayogho.¹⁷

Al-Sa'di also stated that the transfer of citizens and commerce from Biru to Timbuktu began in earnest at the end of the ninth century of the *hijra* (c.AD 1490) and was fairly complete by the middle of the tenth century (c.AD 1540).¹⁸ The testimony of Leo Africanus, who wrote in the early sixteenth century, corroborates al-Sa'di:

When the people of Libya dominated the region [of Walata] they established the seat of their royal government there, and in consequence many Barbaric merchants used to come there. But since the reign of Sonni 'Ali, who was a powerful man, the merchants have gradually abandoned Gualata [Walata] and gone to Tombutto [Timbuktu] and Gago [Gao], hence the chief of Gualata has become poor and powerless. The people of this country speak a language called Songai. These men are

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Timbuktu's reliance on trade meant that it was constantly attracting emigrants and, at the same time, generating its own diaspora, as sons left town to extend their families' trade network. This economic dynamism, along with regional political instability, probably created many periods of decline and growth over the years.

extremely poor and base, but very friendly, especially with foreigners. The chief who governs them pays tribute to the king of Tombutto because he came once into the land [of Walata] with his army. The chief of Gualata fled into the desert, where his kinsmen lived. The king of Tombutto realized that he could not occupy the territory because the chief, aided by his desert kinsmen, caused him a lot of problems, therefore he made an agreement with him which established the payment of a fixed tribute. The chief returned to Gualata and the king returned to Tombutto.¹⁹

There were no doubt many factors in the fifteenth-century rise of Timbuktu and decline of Biru, but despite the corroborating accounts of Leo Africanus and al-Sa'di it seems that they exaggerated the transfer of commerce and citizens to Timbuktu and the 'ruin' of Biru. Certainly many prominent families emigrated to Timbuktu during this period, but Biru survived. Indeed, because of the town's reliance on trade it was constantly attracting emigrants and at the same time generating its own diaspora, as sons left town to extend their families' trade network. This economic dynamism, along with regional political instability, probably created many periods of decline and growth over the last 800 years. The scholarly families of Timbuktu had come from various towns throughout the region in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Among the many Biru families that moved to Timbuktu during the fifteenth century was that of a scholar known as al-Hajj who became *qadi* and who came to Timbuktu in about 1430. Both he and his brother had moved to Timbuktu from Biru. Several of al-Hajj's descendants were prominent Timbuktu judges and scholars.²⁰

Emigration did not always flow from Biru to Timbuktu. Scholars living in Timbuktu fled in numbers to Biru (or Walata) on at least two occasions. The first came in 1468 soon after Sonni 'Ali took power in Timbuktu and came into conflict with several groups, including the scholars. According to the account provided by al-Sa'di, prominent members of two scholarly families fled from Timbuktu to Biru at this time. These were the families of Muhammad Aqit and Andag Muhammad, which were connected by marriage ties. The scholar 'Umar b. Muhammad Aqit left with three sons, all of whom became scholars. Two years after this first episode another group of scholarly families abandoned Timbuktu for Biru, but many of these people were tracked down and killed by Sonni 'Ali's army before they could reach Biru.²¹

The second occasion came in 1591 when the Songhay Kingdom was invaded by the Maghribi expeditionary force. The scholars who fled to Biru after the Maghribi invasion were particularly important and their presence is recalled in biographical dictionaries and chronicles produced in the nineteenth century. Most of the scholarly families that emigrated from Timbuktu to Biru probably did not consider themselves to be Songhay, but they undoubtedly took Songhay culture with them. The emigrant families whose names are known seem by their names to be Berber and Mande. Prominent among them was 'Ali Sila, whose ancestors had migrated from Biru to Timbuktu in the fifteenth century. 'Ali Sila became a prominent judge in Walata and

a close associate of the local leader ‘Umar al-Wali al-Mahjub, one of the Lemhajib. The evidence suggests that the Sila family, as well as the Misir family to which ‘Ali Sila was related through maternal kin, were Soninké.²²

The arrival of Timbuktu scholars in Walata in 1468 and 1591 and the corresponding improvements in trade due to political problems in Timbuktu helped bring Biru (Walata) into its period of full literary production, and sped its transformation into Walata. The earliest known documents from Walata date to the first quarter of the seventeenth century. The scholar who produced the oldest surviving Walati documents was Anda ‘Abd Allah (d.1628), the nephew of ‘Abd Allah al-Mahjub, the eponymous ancestor of the Lemhajib. Further, the two known chronicles of Walati history begin their accounts with the events of the Moroccan invasion. Indeed, Ahmad Baba’s biographical dictionary, *Nayl al-ibtihaj*, completed in 1596, did not list a single scholar identifiable as a Walati. Ahmad Baba gave none of the scholars in his study a Walati *nisba*, although he gave one a Tizakhti *nisba*. Neither did any of the scholars have a Biri *nisba* or the *nisba* of an identifiable Biru/Walata family.²³

Muhammad al-Timbukti al-Daysafi and the Lemhajib

One of the most important sources on the origins of the Lemhajib is a mysterious poem that was probably written in about 1800. According to al-Daysafi’s poem, the Lemhajib consisted of at least three families or patrilineages among which was divided the inherited offices of *qadi* and *imam*. The first was the Bani (or Banu) al-Faqih ‘Uthman; the second was identified only as the family of the *qadi* ‘Ali b. ‘Abd Allah; and the third family, from which the *imam* was chosen, was not identified at all. However, a preface, which was not written by al-Daysafi and may be much more recent, supplements the information presented in the poem. The preface translated below identifies the family of imams with the lineage of Andag Muhammad al-Kabir, who was a famous late sixteenth-century refugee from Timbuktu. It also adds the name ‘Muhammad’ to the lineage of ‘Ali b. ‘Abd Allah. Other versions of the preface, which are not translated below, describe the lineage of ‘Ali b. ‘Abd Allah as the *Awlad Nda ‘Ali*, which is a name found in other accounts of the Lemhajib’s origins.²⁴

In the name of God, the Merciful and Beneficent, the desire of their lords. Peace be on the noble Prophet and on his family and his companions. And from the best of what is said in praise, Muhammad b. Muslim al-Daysafi al-Imyari discussed the merit of Bani [the families of] al-Faqih ‘Uthman b. Muhammad al-Ghayth b. Muhammad al-Fath b. Yahya al-Kamil, and the family of the *qadi* Muhammad b. ‘Ali b. ‘Abd Allah, and the family of the *imam* Andag Muhammad al-Kabir the Mahjubi *imam*, who came to them visiting from Timbuktu, may God bless us through them and their progeny. Amen.

If you are wandering in the countryside
desiring the abode of some of the renowned righteous [folk],

Go to Faqih [the scholar] ‘Uthman the regenerator and his sons,
 most distinguished and noble ancestor of the Fihri.²⁵
 They are the best forbears [in terms of their] customs,
 ancient and good origins in the most civilized societies.
 Muhammad al-Ghayth son of the Pole of his time,
 Muhammad al-Fath the leader in affairs.
 Muhammad al-Ghayth, whose generosity used to take the place of rain
 in times of hardship.
 And his noble father al-Fath Muhammad,
 with whom was victory over difficulties throughout all times.
 And he was the son of Yahya al-Kamil, who was wholly good.
 And he is the son of the progeny of the Khalifas and scholars.
 And from the progeny of him whom Quraysh held in awe
 and devoted themselves to in private and public [the Prophet Muhammad].
 Shuayb b. Idris b. Musa b. Ja‘far, worthy of being traced back
 to the best sons of Nadir.
 Husayn, son of the daughter of al-Mustafa [the Prophet] and his nephew [‘Ali].
 What a splendid fallen one [martyr] of lofty glory and rank.
 And Yahya, through whom God revived his town [religiously].
 When it was sunk deep in Mazdaism and disbelief
 Its people became loyal to God and his religion,
 as did everyone who was in the walled town.
 And he was for them an invulnerable fortress and a place of refuge.
 And for them he was like the stars and the sun and the full moon.

And do not forget the *qadi* of the walled town, the ancestor of its Qadis,
 ‘Ali b. ‘Abd Allah. What a splendid honored brother,
 He was noble and descended from a noble and illustrious people,
 companion of the friend of God, our lord Khadir.
 He was of the progeny of the son of Khawla, Muhammad,
 who was famous for his gentleness and mildness,
 Descendant of the nephew of the Prophet and his executor ‘Ali,
 father of the two grandsons, possessors of knowledge and diffusion.

And their leader, who led the group in virtue, just as he led them in purity of origin.
Imam selected from among the pure *imams*, the *imams* selected [?] him [?] greatly.²⁶
 Indeed the Chosen [the Prophet] was the most just judge of their ancestors,
 the first among the Arabs.
 Sa‘id son of the offspring of al-['As], the best of his companions,
 may God's peace be on him to the end of time.²⁷

And from all of them came powerful men, just as they are the source
 of power and victory.

And they became a tribe [Qabila] and intermarried,
 such that all of them were rooted in the glory of Fihir.²⁸
 They were in greatness unequaled by anyone in terms of
 goodness, character, and glory.
 Indeed, they are also from the best of 'Adnan [still] existing,
 and from close kinship from those who possess goodness.
 Among them are those who ascend the pulpit, and among them
 there are judges in the government who are vigilant.
 And among them are *qadis* who are just, and among them
 leaders in the science (*fiqh*) in verse and prose.
 And they taught the people leadership and piety,
 and before the paths were rough.
 They assumed the name 'Lemhajib' as a group,
 and the scholar is the one concealed (*mahjub*) and learning is what is prominent.²⁹
 Men of energy, white, possessed of splendor,
 conquerors, successors to all the righteous men worthy of mention.³⁰
 And even if I made up my mind to count their virtues,
 I would tire of counting and enumerating.
 Greetings on them from Noble God, and from them and on them
 the best of them for all times.
 And then on al-Mukhtar [the Chosen] a more fitting greeting,
 with the family and his noble companions, possessors of gratitude.

The most significant aspect of this poem is the way it conceptualises the formation of the Lemhajib 'tribe' or alliance as forged from three different clans or sets of families. But before dealing with the conceptual aspects of the poem, the more material details need to be examined. Information about the Lemhajib drawn from al-Bartayli's biographical dictionary and the Walati chronicles provide some solid clues as to the identities of the three sets of families described in al-Daysafi's poem and the preface. The identification of the Faqih 'Uthman and 'Ali b. 'Abd Allah is an important element in the analysis of al-Daysafi's poem, because the families or lineages that derived their identities from them, the Bani al-Faqih 'Uthman and the Awlad Nda 'Ali, clearly predated the formation of the Lemhajib. Similarly important, but somewhat easier, is the identification of Andag Muhammad al-Kabir, who is described as the ancestor of the family of the *imams* in the preface of al-Daysafi's poem, though not in the poem itself. Andag Muhammad al-Kabir (the Elder) was the *qadi* of Timbuktu in the mid-fifteenth century, and several of his descendants took refuge in Walata from the oppression of Sonni 'Ali in 1468, and it is quite likely that some did again after the Moroccan expedition's conquest of Timbuktu in 1591. The Faqih 'Uthman described in the poem seems to refer to a distant ancestor of the families that later formed the Lemhajib, though this cannot be clearly determined from the poem or any available pre-twentieth-century evidence. Faqih 'Uthman was the grandson of Yahya al-Kamil, the

earliest ancestor listed in the Mahjubi biographies of the *Fath al-shakur*, but because families often named children after recent ancestors, there were later 'Faqih 'Uthmans among the Lemhajib.³¹ However, subsequent evidence, which the next section describes, suggests that the Faqih 'Uthman in al-Daysafi's poem referred to the distant ancestor. Finally, it is impossible to identify 'Ali b. 'Abd Allah from the evidence presented so far, as the two names were very common and no previous source mentions a clan or lineage called the Awlad Nda 'Ali.³²

Evidence from the various Walati sources regarding the Lemhajib is only sufficient to suggest a very general period for the composition of al-Daysafi's poem. On first examination it seems that the poem was written no later than the middle of the seventeenth century, because the families he identified as controlling the offices of *qadi* and *imam* lost those offices to the families who descended from Faqih 'Uthman in about 1650 or shortly thereafter.³³ But such a date is at variance with the evidence from the *Tarikh al-Takrur* and the *Fath al-shakur*, which suggests that the descendants of 'Abd Allah al-Mahjub had only produced a few families by 1650, and that the Mahjubi *nisba* probably did not begin to represent a politically significant corporate identity until the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. What is more, the poem marginalises the families it describes as controlling the offices of the *qadi* and *imam* much more than one would expect if those families still controlled those offices. No member of the family of the *imam* is even named in the poem. The preface corrects this deficiency, but cannot compensate for the fact that most of the poem is devoted to the families claiming descent from Faqih 'Uthman. All these factors suggest that the poem was actually written after the control of the offices of *qadi* and *imam* had passed to the families of the Bani al-Faqih 'Uthman. The timing of the poem's composition is significant because it is suggestive of its function. If the poem was produced substantially after the formation of the Mahjubi alliance (as it purports), then it would have served as a rationalisation and a reinforcement of a political process, but if it was written during the process it would constitute a mechanism for social and political change.

In addition to the strong evidence that al-Daysafi's poem was not written before 1650, there are good reasons to suspect that it was written after 1700. The whole body of written evidence from Walata and the region strongly suggests that the Lemhajib did not become an important corporate identity before 1700. The earliest evidence for this assertion comes from the regional literature produced in the seventeenth century. Ahmad Baba's biographical dictionary *Nayl al-ibtihaj*, which he completed in 1596, did not include a single scholar identified by the Mahjubi *nisba* among its 830 biographies. Nor was the *nisba* mentioned in any of the three main chronicles produced in Timbuktu: al-Sa'di's *Tarikh al-Sudan* (c.1655), al-Ka'ti's *Tarikh al-fattash* (c.1665), and the anonymous *Tadhkirat al-nisiyan* (c.1751). Early nineteenth-century sources describing the descendants of 'Abd Allah al-Mahjub also suggest that the Lemhajib was in the early stage of formation in 1650. While no source provides dates for the life or

death of al-Mahjub or any of his sons or grandsons, the *Fath al-shakur* includes a short biography of one of his great-grandsons, and reports that he died in 1689–90. The *Tarikh Bilad al-Takrur* and the *Fath al-shakur* both provide information on the careers and deaths of several of al-Mahjub's great-great-grandsons, whom they describe as dying between 1710 and 1758, though most died around 1725. If each generation was divided by about 25 to 30 years, then al-Mahjub would have died some time between 1600 and 1625. The formation of the Lemhajib no doubt began as a small clan during the lives of his grandsons and began to grow into a larger, more diverse alliance a generation or two later, perhaps around 1700.

In 1641 the *qadi* of Walata, Sidi Muhammad b. Muhammad b. 'Ali Sila, died and was eventually replaced by Ahmad al-Wali, a descendant of Faqih 'Uthman and al-Mahjub. Sidi Muhammad was the last *qadi* from a group of families that had previously dominated the qadiship, and Ahmad al-Wali was the first *imam* and *qadi* from among the Lemhajib. When Ahmad al-Wali died in 1683 he was replaced by 'Abd Allah b. Abu Bakr, a paternal cousin. At this point the Sidi Ahmad branch of the Bani al-Faqih 'Uthman seems to have been subordinate to the descendants of al-Mahjub, who controlled the offices of *qadi* and *imam*. After the death of 'Abd Allah b. Abu Bakr, the qadiship and imamship was split between two men, though both were descendants of al-Mahjub. But when this third Mahjubi *imam* died in 1715, the office of *imam* passed to a descendant of the Sidi Ahmad branch for the first time, and there it stayed for the next 150 years. The office of *qadi* remained under the control of the descendants of al-Mahjub, and thus the two branches of the Bani al-Faqih 'Uthman shared power on a more or less equal basis. It is unlikely that the Sidi Ahmad branch became assimilated into the broader Mahjubi identity before this power-sharing arrangement had become institutionalised.³⁴ When the first *imam* from the Sidi Ahmad branch died in 1732 he was replaced by a paternal cousin, so at this point the arrangement between the two branches of the Bani al-Faqih 'Uthman was becoming secure.³⁵

Talib Bubakar's last statement on Mahjubi identity

The *Minah* was Talib Bubakar's final statement about Walata and its history, which he completed around 1915. Talib Bubakar devoted a special section of the *Minah* to the Lemhajib and their origins, though he did not provide an actual account of Yahya al-Kamil's arrival at Biru/Walata or any information about the early history of the town. In this section he presented al-Daysafi's poem, but did not endorse its principal message: that the Lemhajib were actually three separate patrilineages that unified through intermarriage, and that the primary lineage (of Faqih 'Uthman) was descended from the Prophet Muhammad through Fatima. Neither did Talib Bubakar assert directly that al-Daysafi was wrong. Instead, he stated that the Lemhajib was a patrilineage descended from Yahya al-Kamil, and that though there were several theories about his origins, no one knew for sure, except God. This, Talib Bubakar explained, was

because Yahya al-Kamil successfully hid his origins, apparently even from his own family.³⁶ However, by presenting the claim without endorsing it, Talib Bubakar effectively supported the claim without technically doing so, although he also mentioned the Kunta story of ‘Uqba ibn Nafi’. Talib Bubakar did provide information about the origins of the woman who married Yahya al-Kamil’s son, Muhammad, and gave birth to the lineage of al-Faqih ‘Uthman. Likewise, he also provided information about the mother of al-Mahjub and Sidi Ahmad, the two sons who actually started the expansion of the lineage. Talib Bubakar wrote:

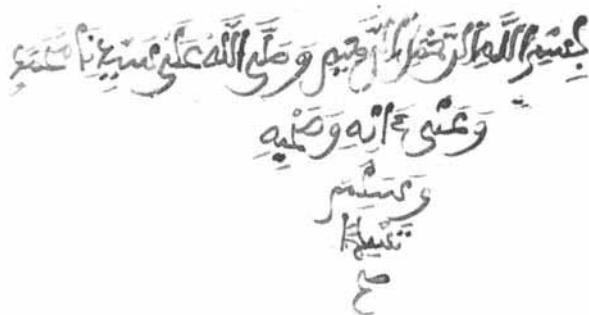
Al-Mahjub and Sidi Ahmad were full brothers (*shaqiqan*), and they are the ones from whom branched the Lemhajib. Their mother was the daughter of Baba Misir Biru, of the progeny of the *Wali Allah* [friend of God], Anda ‘Ali, the ancestor of the ‘Ali al-Qadi [family of the *qadi*] of the progeny of Muhammad b. al-Hanifiyya, son of our master ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. May God be pleased with him. Al-Mahjub and Sidi Ahmad were the sons of Muhammad al-Ghayth b. Muhammad al-Fath b. ‘Abd Allah al-Qutb b. Muhammad al-Faqih b. al-Faqih b. al-Faqih ‘Uthman b. Muhammad b. Yahya al-Kamil. Our great ancestor is the one who came to Walata with his son Muhammad in the fifth century. Then his son Muhammad married the daughter of the friend of God almighty, Anda ‘Ali, the family of the *qadi*, which has completely vanished away. They are the progeny of Muhammad b. al-Hanifiyya, son of our master ‘Ali b. Abi Talib. May God be pleased with him. She [the daughter of Anda ‘Ali] gave birth to al-Faqih ‘Uthman and Anda ‘Ali is his ancestor by his mother. And Muhammad al-Ghayth is the father of al-Mahjub and Sidi Ahmad, and their mother is the daughter of Baba Misir Biru of the progeny of Anda ‘Ali also. As for our great ancestor Yahya al-Kamil, he never mentioned his *nasab* [origins]...Our great ancestor Yahya al-Kamil was a contemporary of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani the Sharif, and I think there was some relationship between them, but I do not know what it was.³⁷

This passage reveals that Talib Bubakar was well informed about the Lemhajib’s matrilineal kinship with some very old and powerful Walati families. It was important for him to show the Lemhajib’s matrilineal connection to Baba Misir Biru and Anda ‘Ali because they belonged to Walata’s ‘Ali al-Qadi, the family of the *qadi*. Several sources suggest that it was from this group of families that the Lemhajib obtained the qadiship, though they provide relatively little information about the ‘Ali al-Qadi. One apparent member was a Walati scholar named Muhammad b. Muhammad b. ‘Ali Sila, whose ancestors lived in Biru/Walata, then migrated to Timbuktu in the fifteenth century, and finally returned to Walata in the seventeenth century. Muhammad, the grandson of ‘Ali Sila, was the earliest recorded *qadi* of Walata, and died in 1640. The *Fath al-shakur* describes ‘Ali Sila as a close associate of ‘Umar al-Wali al-Mahjubi, who was the grandson of ‘Abd Allah al-Mahjub. ‘Ali Sila was part of the family of ‘Ali b. ‘Abd Allah (or Anda ‘Ali), which al-Daysafi and Talib Bubakar described as dominating the office

of *qadi*.³⁸ It seems that Sidi Ahmad al-Wali (d.1683–84) became the first *imam* and *qadi* of the lineage of Bani al-Faqih ‘Uthman immediately after the death of Qadi Muhammad b. Muhammad b. ‘Ali Sila, or possibly after the death of Muhammad’s son Atiq some time after 1667. Given the emphasis that al-Daysafi and Talib Bubakar placed on intermarriage, it seems likely that Muhammad b. Muhammad b. ‘Ali Sila was Sidi Ahmad al-Wali’s maternal grandfather, or perhaps his maternal uncle.

The connection between the lineages of Anda ‘Ali and al-Faqih ‘Uthman is particularly historic because the Anda ‘Ali appear to have been Soninké. Elias Saad, a modern historian, has argued that both Baba Misir Biru and ‘Ali Sila were Soninké, or at least descended from Soninké families. His assertion is supported by the *Tarikh Walata-I*, which described the Walati scholar Sidi Muhammad b. al-Hajj Sila (d.1727–28) as Sudani or black. Similarly, the *Tarikh al-Sudan* described the Songhay dynasty of Askiya Muhammad as ‘Silanké’.³⁹ Talib Bubakar’s claim that the Anda ‘Ali were descended from the Prophet’s cousin does not preclude them from being culturally Soninké.

It is not clear when the unification of the families of Anda ‘Ali and al-Faqih ‘Uthman took place, but it is likely that the Anda ‘Ali retained their separate identity for some time after their political and social assimilation. Nevertheless, by the time Talib Bubakar wrote the *Minah*, the Walati descendants of ‘Ali Sila, Anda ‘Ali, and Andag Muhammad and the other families that became Mahjubi were no longer socially identifiable, as they had been completely absorbed or assimilated into the Lemhajib. The assimilation of the lineage of ‘Ali Sila into the Lemhajib is particularly significant because the families of Baba Misir Biru and ‘Ali Sila were Soninké, or were of Soninké origin. The assimilation and disappearance of these families provides an explanation for the apparent disappearance of the original Mande inhabitants of Biru/Walata. They were absorbed, through intermarriage, into the town’s dominant ‘Arab’ social groups.



NOTES

- 1 Nkrumah (1967: 7–88).
- 2 Ajayi (1967: 290).
- 3 See for example the websites http://www.csupomona.edu/~plin/lis201/medieval_curriculum.html and <http://www.answers.com/topic/medieval-university>.
- 4 Bathily (1975: 16). See also Hunwick (1985: 15) and Meunié (1961: 72).
- 5 Trimmingham (1975: 58) and Bathily (1975: 16). Bathily hypothesised that the name 'Biru' was 'indicative of the provisional character of the settlement there'. Even if this were true, it would not necessarily imply that the settlement still retained this 'provisional' character at the time of the arrival of the Masufa. In late sixteenth-century Songhay the Mande name seems to have been more commonly used than the Arabised Berber name. See also al-Sa'di (1964). His work contains 17 uses of the name 'Biru', but only 7 uses of 'Walata' and 'Iwalatan' combined.
- 6 Trimmingham (1975: 58) and Lucas (1931: 154–160). Lucas collected oral accounts of the arrival of the 'Maures' in the Adrar. Most of the 'Maures' he interviewed in 1931 believed that their ancestors met and conquered an Azayr-speaking Sarakolé people when they moved into the Adrar and Tagant. Generally, the Bidan consider the Sarakolé to be the ancestors of the people whom they now most often refer to as the 'Suwanik'. Some of the Bidan that Colonel Modat interviewed in 1919 reported that a people called the Bafur had settled in the Adrar before or at the same time as the proto-Mande (Modat 1919: 378).
- 7 Interview with Neh Wuld 'Abd al-Rahman. Research notes available from author (page 91).
- 8 Certain crafts are associated with Haratin, such as basket and mat making, whereas Bidani women more often sew and make pottery.
- 9 Interview, several Lemhajib. Research notes available from author (pages 128, 131).
- 10 Ibn Khaldun (1981: 339). Ibn Khaldun stated that Arabs, apparently the Hassan, 'molested caravans between Tuwat and Walatan [*sic*]'. See also Levtzion (1994: 159).
- 11 Africanus (1956: 463–464).
- 12 In the mid-nineteenth century, Heinrich Barth stated that Azayr was spoken at Walata, though he did not visit there. See Barth (1965: 696).
- 13 Al-Sa'di (1964). Compare index entries for Biru and Walata.
- 14 Al-Sa'di (1964: 21; trans. 36–37).
- 15 Elias Saad (1983: 32–33), a modern historian of Timbuktu, suggested that al-Sa'di did not intend the name 'Maghrib', as it appears in this passage, to refer to north-west Africa, but rather to the lands *west* of Timbuktu, that is, Biru, Kumbi and Tishit. However, the context of al-Sa'di's statement does not support this interpretation. After all, al-Sa'di's statement on Timbuktu immediately followed his assertion that the most prominent citizens of Biru/Walata were originally from North Africa. According to the *Tarikh Tishit*, the town was established in 1153. See Monteil (1939: 284).
- 16 Wilks (1982).
- 17 Saad (1983: 7, 243–246).
- 18 Saad (1983: 22).
- 19 Africanus (1956: 463–464).
- 20 Africanus (1956: 27–28).
- 21 Al-Sa'di (1964: 65–67; trans. 105–108).
- 22 Saad (1983: 130, 278). This is particularly significant for the history of the Lemhajib, who dominated Walata in the nineteenth century. The pre-eminent Mahjubi scholar linked the earliest remembered Mahjubi patriarch to Baba Misir Biru through marriage to his daughter. The family name of 'Ali Sila may have also been pronounced by some as 'Sili'.
- 23 Baba (1989: 587).
- 24 See the preface of the more recent copy of al-Daysafi's poem from the library of Bati Wuld Baba, which is translated from Arabic to Spanish in Corral (2000: 225–226).
- 25 Ancestors of Quraysh, the eponymous ancestor of the Prophet's tribe or tribal confederation.
- 26 The translation of this line is very much in doubt.
- 27 This refers to Amr b. al-'As, the conqueror of Egypt.
- 28 Fihr was supposed to be the ancestor of the Quraysh, the 'tribe' of the Prophet Muhammad and 'Uqba ibn Nafi'.
- 29 This is a clever play on words (al-'alim al-Mahjub [the hidden knower] of 'ilm al-badr).
- 30 The use of the word 'white' here probably is intended to symbolise purity or nobility.
- 31 There was a later Mahjubi scholar named Faqih 'Uthman, who died in 1715–16 and was the son of 'Umar al-Wali b. Shaykh Muhammad 'Abd Allah. Faqih 'Uthman b. 'Umar al-Wali was a prominent patriarch of the Awlad al-Faqih 'Uthman. Al-Bartayli introduced 'Uthman as 'Sidi' in his biography, but he also called him a '*faqih*'. His biography is one of the longest in the *Fath al-shakur*, and al-Bartayli praised his scholarship and his ability to intimidate bandits and those who

would impose tribute on Walata. 'Uthman's father, 'Umar al-Wali, received a similarly laudatory notice, and today the Lemhajib visit his tomb more than any other ancestor. See al-Bartayli (1981: 191–195).

- 32 Even though there is a man named 'Ali b. 'Abd Allah in the Sidi Ahmad branch of what became the Mahjubi lineage, this is apparently only coincidence. There is no evidence that anyone from the Sidi Ahmad branch was ever *qadi*, the office that the Awwal Nda 'Ali is supposed to have dominated, and later evidence suggests that the 'Ali b. 'Abd Allah that al-Daysafi named did not belong to the lineage descending from Yahya al-Kamil.
- 33 Al-Bartayli mentioned that Sidi Ahmad al-Wali al-Mahjubi (d.1683–84) was the first member of Faqih 'Uthman's family to hold the office of *imam*. This suggests that al-Daysafi wrote his poem before 1680 because he attributed the office of *imam* to the family that the preface identifies as the descendants of Andag Muhammad (al-Bartayli 1981: 41–42).
- 34 The evidence for this argument is drawn primarily from the *Tarikh Walata-I* and the *Fath al-shakur*, especially al-Bartayli's biographies numbered 23, 55, 160 and 163. For 'Abd Allah al-Mahjub's great-grandson, Talib Bubakar b. 'Ali b. al-Shaykh b. al-Mahjub, see al-Bartayli (1981: bio. 55).
- 35 See the death notices for Imam Ahmad b. Bubakar (d.1732) and Imam Sidi 'Uthman b. 'Abd Allah (d.1744) in the *Tarikh Walata-I*, 562, 564.
- 36 Al-Mahjubi, *Minah*, f.270–278, Ms 699, Ahmed Baba Institute, Timbuktu.
- 37 Al-Mahjubi, *Minah*, f.275–276, Ms 699, Ahmed Baba Institute, Timbuktu.
- 38 For the biography of Muhammad b. Muhammad b. 'Ali Sila and his ancestor, see al-Bartayli (1981: 114, 197). 'Umar al-Wali al-Mahjubi was also the father of Faqih 'Uthman (d.1715), who was named for the eponymous ancestor of the Bani al-Faqih 'Uthman (al-Bartayli 1981: 41, 191). For a brief discussion of these relationships see Saad (1983: 130, and footnote 23 on 282).
- 39 'Ali Sila (or Sili) was the son of Baba Misir Biru's daughter. For his biography see al-Bartayli (1981: 197). For the race of Muhammad b. al-Hajj Sila see *Tarikh Walata-I*, 560. See the analysis of Saad (1983: 110, and fn. 93 & 94 on 278). For the Sila or Silanké origins of Askiya Dawud, see Hunwick (1999: 102, 112).

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